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978-1-107-00934-9 - Kant's Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: A Commentary

James J. Dicenso

Excerpt

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Religion through the lens
of practical reason

Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (hereafter *Religion*), is one of the great modern examinations of the meaning and function of religion. It stands alongside Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* and Hume's *Natural History of Religion* and *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* as a key work analyzing religious beliefs and institutions in terms of their impact on human affairs. Much like his predecessors, Kant illustrates how religious systems are deeply intertwined with the formation of cultural values, with psychological desires for meaning and consolation, with legitimizing social and political institutions, and above all with questions of ethics. Because of the multidisciplinary and historically documented nature of this analysis, Kant's treatment of the philosophy of religion is not confined to the narrow task of proving or disproving specific theological and religious doctrines. It is, in fact, inseparable from inquiries into the types of attitudes, world-views, and institutions operative within a given cultural sphere, and so makes an ongoing, seminal contribution to both ethical and political thinking. Kant's *Religion* is therefore an indispensable modern text addressing the phenomena of religion on several interrelated levels. It also plays a crucial role in developing a number of themes that are essential to Kant's mature or critical philosophy, such as the human propensity to freely adopt evil maxims, the possible pedagogical function of examples and models in assisting ethical cultivation, the interconnections between individual development and the quality of the social institutions informing one's public world, and, above all, the need to assess all existing institutions with reference to rational ethical principles.

As I have previously argued, the theme of religion is quite prominent in most of Kant's mature writings, including all three *Critiques*, and there is direct continuity and consistency between these analyses

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and those of *Religion*.¹ However, in these earlier critical writings, religious issues are mainly addressed on two fairly abstract levels. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, rational theology is engaged as a subset of general metaphysics; this analysis provides an illustration of the epistemological principle that all knowledge requires direct or indirect sensory input, as mediated by the categories of the understanding. Assessed in terms of this empirical criterion, rather than according to mere logical coherence and elegance, theological arguments for the existence of a highest being are shown to fall short.²

After the first *Critique*, Kant is not especially concerned with speculative issues of the truth or falsity of religious claims, or with proofs and refutations thereof. These issues are taken to have been definitively resolved with the demonstration of the impossibility of all supersensible knowledge. In fact, even in the first *Critique*, Kant decisively turns to the question of a rational, practically oriented interpretation of religious and theological ideas, specifically the idea of God. This interpretive approach focuses on the significance of rational religious ideas as providing motivating conceptual schemes, and as guiding our ethical judgment.³ A practical approach to religious discourse is further developed in the second and third *Critiques*, both in terms of the practical postulates that respond to the problem of our capacity for ethical focus, motivation, and hope, and in terms of symbolic representations of the ends of ethical practice (i.e., the highest good). In a limited way, these inquiries engage religious ideas and images already operative in the public sphere and give them a rational, ethical interpretation.⁴ However, it is only with *Religion* of 1793 that Kant applies the

¹ See J. DiCenso, *Kant, Religion, and Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2011). This work provides an inclusive analysis of the strategic place of inquiries into religion in Kant's mature thinking, especially in the first *Critique* and the ethical writings. The present project generally assumes this background, and undertakes a detailed analysis of and commentary on *Religion*, while providing only the most crucial references to related themes in Kant's other writings.

² For Kant's emphasis on basing knowledge on experience see A462–64/B490–92, and A582/B610. The critical analysis of theological proofs for the existence of God occupies most of sections A584–629/B612–57 of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

³ The first *Critique* emphasizes that we “would be without any incentive [*Triebfedern*], if a highest being were not presupposed who could give effect and emphasis to the practical laws” (A589/B617). Kant also writes that moral laws “postulate this existence [of a highest being] rightfully but, of course, only practically [*nur praktisch postuliren*]” (A634/B662). The postulates of practical reason, in which the idea of God is shown to have regulative status for human ethical practice, are further discussed at A828–29/B856–57.

⁴ In discussing the moral necessity of postulating a highest being, Kant states that “this moral necessity is *subjective*, that is, a need, and not *objective*, that is itself a duty” (CPrR, V: 125). He also emphasizes that “it is not to be understood by this that it is necessary to assume the existence of God as a *ground of all obligation in general* (this rests, as has been sufficiently shown, solely on the autonomy of reason itself)” (CPrR, V: 125–26).

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principles of rational, moral religion to historical and cultural forms of religion. In doing so, he develops a general analysis of popular narratives, figures and images, and of the institutional forms and structures of authority supporting these traditions. He accomplishes this task mainly through a sustained inquiry into biblical writings and the institutionalized practices of Christianity, although he also discusses other traditions in a cursory manner. These analyses are based on interpretive principles that can be applied much more broadly than Kant himself was able, given the limitations of his knowledge of world religions, which generally reflected the scholarship of the time. Nevertheless, because of their focus on shared rational principles, his analyses can continue to make a vital contribution to the ongoing project of critically assessing and modifying historically conditioned ideas and institutions of all kinds. Unfortunately, the abiding importance of Kant's work on religion is matched only by the density and difficulty of his exposition; this is a problem that the present commentary is designed to rectify, at least in part.

Problems with censorship

It is particularly noteworthy that Kant's critical examination of religion as a social and political force coincided with decidedly regressive political changes occurring in the Prussia of his time, in which heightened emphasis was placed on controlling public discourse about religious topics. Because of these developments, Kant's initial efforts to publish *Religion* were impeded by serious opposition from the authorities. During most of Kant's adult life, Prussia was ruled by Frederick II, also known as Frederick the Great (ruled 1740–1786), who was considered a paragon of "enlightened absolutism." Although Prussia was a non-democratic, absolutist state (as were most European states at the time), Frederick II was supportive of innovations in rational and scientific inquiry as well as of cultural and artistic production. Hence his reign was somewhat conducive to the flowering of the open, exploratory, and innovative thinking generally characteristic of the European Enlightenment.⁵ There was far greater freedom of thought and expression under Frederick II than under his nephew and successor, Frederick William II. The latter, who reigned from 1786 to 1797,

⁵ Christopher Clark draws a portrait of Frederick as a man of wide cultural interests and intellectual accomplishments, as well as being a stalwart political leader. See *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600–1947* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 183ff.

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is described by Allen Wood as "a religious fanatic."⁶ He was also influenced by a coterie of ultraconservative advisors, many of whom were connected with the anti-Enlightenment trends of the Rosicrucian movement.⁷

Among these influential figures, a key player was Johann Christoph Wöllner, who, following an earlier career as a pastor, eventually became minister of culture under Frederick William II. As Christopher Clark summarizes, "In this post, Wöllner dedicated himself to an authoritarian cultural policy whose objective was to curb the supposedly corrosive effects of skepticism on the moral fabric of school, church and university." To this end, a decree was instituted as the "Edict on Religion of 9 August 1788," which was designed to control religious practice and especially public discussion of religious topics. Furthermore, "the edict introduced new censorship mechanisms to impose doctrinal conformity on all texts for school and university study."⁸ This targeting of free thinking and speech in relation to topics of religion came into even greater focus with a supplementary decree: "A censorship edict was published in December 1788 in an effort to stem the flow of pamphlets and articles criticizing the new measures. A Royal Examining Commission was established to flush out the rationalists in church and teaching offices."⁹ Clark observes that one of those who "came to the attention of the authorities was Immanuel Kant himself: In autumn of 1794, he received a stiff warning in the form of a royal order stating that the essay collection published as *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* 'abused . . . philosophy for the purpose of distorting and disparaging several principal and fundamental doctrines of Holy Scripture.'"¹⁰

In fact, for some time prior to receiving this royal order, Kant had been well aware that freedom to undertake open inquiries into religion was being curtailed by the new king and his sycophants. The issue arises in a letter of February 2, 1792, to J. G. Fichte, the publication of whose first book, *Attempt at a Critique of all Revelation*, was threatened because of rejection by what Kant calls the "current strict censor." Fichte, whose early work is deeply influenced by Kant, had

⁶ Allen W. Wood, "General Introduction" to Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. xv.

⁷ Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 339ff.

⁸ Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, pp. 268–69.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

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written and requested advice on how to deal with this obstruction.¹¹ Kant responds by first confirming his support for the book's thesis that "faith in a given revelation cannot be rationally justified on the basis of a belief in miracles." This argument is also formulated in *Religion*, in which alleged supernatural phenomena are either symbolically reinterpreted or simply dismissed according to criteria set by rational and ethical principles. In his letter, Kant articulates this theme by insisting that "it follows necessarily that a religion may contain no article of faith other than one that exists for pure reason as well."¹² Kant also offers a succinct summary of the stance concerning revealed scriptures that is developed at length in *Religion*. He explains how the rational approach taken by both himself and Fichte is opposed to the views of those seeking to stifle freedom of thought and expression. He then discusses how historically the introduction of articles of faith conformable to reason (i.e., conformable to rational ethical principles) was accompanied, because of the needs of the general populace, by accounts of miracles. He believes that these are now dispensable in the modern context and not necessary for rational faith. However, Kant continues, "by today's assumed maxims [i.e., according to the official edicts seeking to control discussions of religion], it seems that the censor would not allow you to say this. For according to those maxims, certain texts in the confession of faith are supposed to be taken so literally that the human understanding can barely grasp their sense, much less see their rational truth, with the result that they need perpetually to be supported by a miracle and could never become articles of faith prescribed by reason alone." This incisive comment pinpoints the problems with religious dogmatism and literalism that are also analyzed in *Religion*. By insisting on literalism, religious and public authorities create a fissure between faith and reason; they must have recourse to accounts of supernatural interventions and wonders to sustain the interpretation of all scriptural passages as literally and descriptively true. In sharp contrast with these dogmatic views, Kant argues: "That the revelation of such propositions was only intended, as an accommodation to our weakness, to provide a visible cloak for them [*einer sinnlichen Hülle aufzustellen*], and that this

¹¹ Fichte's book was subsequently passed by a more liberal-minded theologian, although it initially appeared anonymously. In fact, many readers of the time thought that the book had been written by Kant. See Allen Wood, editor's introduction to J. G. Fichte, *Attempt at a Critique of all Revelation* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. ix. Also see Fichte's letter to Kant of August 6, 1792; XI: 350, *Correspondence* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 423.

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Correspondence*, XI: 321, p. 402.

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revelation can have merely subjective truth, is not acknowledged by the censor. He demands that they be taken as objective truths."¹³ This explicates Kant's firm position that the historically transmitted teachings and narratives constituting a revelation should be interpreted as illustrative supports and guides for our rational ethical practice.

A few weeks later, in a letter to C. G. Selle of February 24, 1792, Kant writes of how "recently a New Order has been established which may frustrate my intended project [i.e., *Religion*] completely. I refer to the restriction on the freedom to think aloud about matters which might even indirectly relate to theology."¹⁴ As things turned out, the first essay constituting *Religion*, "Of Radical Evil in Human Nature," was initially published in the April 1792 issue of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*; it was passed by the censor by being classified as a philosophical rather than a theological writing. However, when Kant submitted the second essay ("Concerning the Struggle of the Good with the Evil Principle for Dominion over the Human Being") to the censor for approval it was rejected.¹⁵ The original plan was to publish all four essays constituting the four parts of *Religion* in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. However, after this hindrance Kant wrote to the editor of the journal, Johann Erich Biester, to ask for the return of the second essay so that he might put it "to another use" (i.e., to include it in the book-length publication). In this letter, Kant tellingly refers to the three members of the censorship committee as "three Inquisitors [*drei Glaubensrichter*]."¹⁶

Subsequently, Kant went ahead and published the four essays of *Religion* as a single volume by submitting it for approval through the philosophical rather than the theological faculty; it duly appeared in the spring of 1793. As Manfred Kuehn notes, "part of the book, namely the chapter on the struggle between the good and evil principles, had already been banned by the Berlin censors. Accordingly, its publication could only be construed as a slap in the face of Wöllner and his censors."¹⁷ This act of defiance was the result of an unyielding principled stance on Kant's part. A strong advocacy for freedom of thought and freedom of speech is a prominent theme running throughout Kant's mature writings; these freedoms are central to his epistemology,

¹³ Ibid., XI: 322, p. 403.¹⁴ Ibid., XI: 327, p. 408.¹⁵ Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography*, p. 363.¹⁶ Kant, *Correspondence*, XI: 349, p. 422.¹⁷ Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography*, p. 365.

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ethics, and political theory.¹⁸ In fact, a major theme of *Religion* concerns the freedom to inquire into religious topics and to assess religious traditions according to principles of reason. Not surprisingly, then, on October 1, 1794, Kant received the official letter of censure from Frederick William II (signed by Wöllner). In part, the letter stated that: "Our most high person has long observed with great displeasure how you misuse your philosophy to distort and disparage many of the cardinal and foundational teachings of the Holy Scriptures and of Christianity; how you have done this specifically in your book, 'Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason,' and similarly in other shorter treatises." The letter goes on to castigate Kant for irresponsibility and for acting against "our sovereign purposes." Finally, the king demands that Kant give an account of himself and insists that "in the future, to avoid our highest disfavor, you will be guilty of no such fault."¹⁹

In a letter written later that same October, Kant responded to Frederick William II by reiterating that his book "is intended merely as an examination of rational religion [*Vernunftreligion*], an assessment of its priority as the highest condition of all true religion, of its completeness and practical [i.e., ethical] aim..."²⁰ This point is followed by a statement indicating that the analysis involves a general inquiry into rational religion as applied to all revealed (historical) traditions. Hence the treatment of Christianity is used to illustrate more encompassing interpretive procedures: "rational religion is related to revealed religion in general, without specifying which one it is (where Christianity, for example, is regarded as the mere idea of a conceivable revelation)."²¹ In other words, *Religion* is mainly directed toward an explication of the principles of rational or moral religion in Kant's terms; this is irreducible to any historical faith in particular. The discussion of historical faiths, or revelations, of which Christianity is clearly the primary example, is guided by these rational principles. This inquiry is formulated either in terms of discerning symbolic representations of ethical principles within historical traditions, or in terms of critically assessing traditions with reference to the principles of ethical religion.

¹⁸ For example, in the first *Critique* Kant proclaims "the freedom to exhibit the thoughts and doubts which one cannot resolve oneself for public judgment without thereupon being decried as a malcontent and a dangerous citizen" (A752/B780).

¹⁹ Kant, *Correspondence*, XI: 525, p. 485; translation modified.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, XI: 528; p. 487.

²¹ *Ibid.*

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Therefore, emphasizing the rational and ethical criteria that form the cornerstone of his analyses, Kant continues: "I do not regard it as disparaging of a revealed doctrine to say that, in relation to its practical use (which constitutes the essential part of all religion), it must be interpreted in accordance with the principles of pure rational faith and must be urged on us openly."²² These comments clearly show Kant's adamancy in maintaining his principled interpretation of religion even in the face of repressive despotic authority. The capacity to support ethical practice according to rational principles is the core of ethical religion, and this can only be cultivated openly and freely, not according to enforced doctrines. All historical (i.e., culturally conditioned) forms of religion must be assessed and interpreted according to these ethical criteria. However, Kant did promise to refrain from publishing anything further on religious matters.²³ Ultimately, he considered this obligation to be fulfilled with the death of the monarch to whom it was made, as a letter of April 5, 1798, pertaining to the publication of *Conflict of the Faculties* after four years of delay reveals.²⁴ There is no reason to doubt Kant's own assessment of his project as outlined in these documents. It is clearly a rational interpretation of historical religion according to the criteria of Kant's epistemological and ethical system, framed in terms of "rational religion." In accordance with the ethical treatment of religious concepts developed in the three *Critiques* and the *Groundwork*, practical reason sets the terms for his explication of all historical, institutional, and scriptural religious phenomena.

Whatever personal and political reasons might have contributed to the writing of *Religion*, it remains the case that Kant's sustained inquiry into historical religions emerges directly from the epistemological, ethical, and political analyses of his prior writings. Most specifically, *Religion* addresses the problem of applying ethical principles under the constraints of phenomenal conditions.²⁵ In other words, rather than presenting a merely abstract set of ethical and political ideals, the book critically engages a widespread and influential feature of all known cultures, that is, religion in its many forms, as a way to help cultivate ethical principles within the public sphere. The inquiries of *Religion* are

²² Ibid., XI: 529; p. 487.

²³ Ibid., XI: 530, p. 488.

²⁴ Ibid., XII: 240; p. 544.

²⁵ This argument is developed in detail in *Kant, Religion, and Politics*. I show that the application of the principles of rational religion to existing historical religions such as Christianity is part of a continuing strategy of making abstract principles accessible to a wider public.

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decidedly more historically and culturally oriented than are most of Kant's prior ethical writings. The book addresses the historical fact that a multiplicity of religions have existed and continue to exist, and that they influence people's worldviews and moral behavior in very specific and often profound ways. Because of this authority and power, the task of enlightenment requires that religions be engaged by a critical analysis, applying ethical principles based on the tenets of pure practical reason. Otherwise, there is a serious risk that hegemonic and parochial influences sustained by historical traditions will occlude our ability to grasp and instantiate the categorical imperative in our lives. Religious traditions are deeply intertwined with the formation of cultures as well as with individual personalities, and they respond to profound human needs for meaning, orientation, order, and comfort. These historically transmitted sets of doctrines and customs constitute revelation, that is, traditions influencing our ethical, social, and political worldviews. In sum, Kant is addressing a social and political fact: Religions can affect the way people think, the values to which they give priority, the communities they form, and how they imagine the goals and ends orienting their lives. As such, this fact cuts across cultural differences, and it remains important to today's world, if in different ways from Kant's time.

Kantian ethics and religion

It is foundational for understanding *Religion* that the notion of ethical religion assumes and builds upon the main elements of Kantian philosophy, especially its ethics. This point is immediately established in the preface to *Religion* of 1793, concerning which Kuehn rightly states that "the first sentence sounds a tone of defiance" (i.e., against the repressive measures of the authorities and their dogmatic ideology).²⁶ Indeed, in a letter written around the time of the publication of *Religion*, Kant refers to his preface as "in a way rather violent," and explains that it was occasioned by the censorship of the second part of the book.²⁷ To illustrate Kant's stance on these matters, Kuehn cites the opening passage to the preface, which is here given according to the Cambridge translation: "So far as morality is based on the

²⁶ Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography*, p. 366.

²⁷ These comments appear in a letter to Carl Friedrich Staudlin of May 4, 1793 (XI: 429–30; *Correspondence*, p. 458).

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conception of the human being as one who is free but who also, just because of that, binds himself through his reason to unconditional laws, it is in need neither of the idea of another being above him in order to recognize his duty, nor, that he observe it, of an incentive other than the law itself" (VI: 3).²⁸ This declaration, which is entirely consistent with the analyses developed throughout *Religion*, makes clear that true moral principles are generated rationally and are not dependent on any higher power or external authority. As we shall see, *Religion* specifically applies rational ethical principles as interpretive and evaluative criteria to diverse historical religious traditions; it attempts to recruit established institutional religions in the cause of promoting universalizable rather than merely parochial ethical principles. Accordingly, throughout *Religion*, Kant refers to the principles of ethics or morals (generally used interchangeably), as well as to the moral law. These expressions are shorthand for both the categorical imperative in its various interconnected formulae and for practical reason itself, as developed in key writings such as the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Readers wishing to understand *Religion* as fully as possible should therefore consult these works, or develop background in Kant's ethical theory in some other way. However, to supply the necessary context I will begin with a brief account of some of the main ideas; other relevant ideas will be discussed further at the appropriate points in the exposition.

The opening passage of *Religion* stresses how it is our very capacity for freedom (or autonomy) that allows us to bind ourselves to unconditional, rationally formulated laws. This is because these laws are generated by rational procedures, and so apply equally to all rational beings. To be autonomous means to give oneself laws as a rational being. This is antithetical to lawless freedom disregarding the rights of others, and it is not equivalent to mere externally enforced laws and codes, which need not reflect principles of equality, justice, and truth. As Kant explains in the first *Critique*, in a just state, an individual renounces the lawlessness symbolized by the state of nature "in order to submit himself to the lawful coercion which alone limits our freedom in such a way that it can be consistent with the freedom of everyone else and thereby with the common good" (A752/B780). This idea forms the basis for explicating two aspects of social existence: the ethico-civil (internal ethical orientations) and juridico-civil (external

²⁸ I discuss this passage in greater detail in the next chapter.